



Tenuta Linazza Olive Farm in Xylella Fastidiosa ravaged Salento, Puglia

Robbie and Anne-Marie Cullen of Todds Road Olives recently returned from a six-night stay on an olive farm in the village of Castoglione, Salento, Southeastern Italy, where they witnessed the devastating impact of *Xylella fastidiosa*. This harmful bacterium has ravaged the region, destroying centuries-old olive trees as it spreads northward from Salento into the rest of Puglia. Once responsible for 40% of Italy's olive oil production, Puglia's output is now in decline. Below, Robbie shares his account of their wonderful experience.

Collected from Brindisi Airport on 16 October 2024 by Antonia, one of our four hosts, we were headed for a six-night olive farm-stay experience on the Tenuta Linazza olive farm, beside the village of Castoglione. He drove us south 82 kilometers, well down into the southern region of Puglia known as Solento, the stiletto heel of Italy, past many dead but still majestic olive tree skeletons, and replacement new plantings of leccino. Coffee plants from Africa, he explained, had brought a deadly disease for the existing olive trees into Solento, which disease is slowly spreading northward. The sad tree skeletons continue to display their careful past pruning. Had they been able, I am sure those old olive trees would have laughed at any tree shaker imprudent enough to have tried to shake them in their glory days. The new Leccino trees, however, are not affected by the disease.



The disease is a bacteria called *Xylella Fastidiosa*. It first appeared in Solento in 2013 and spreads at a current rate of around 20 miles per year, by Spittlebugs moving from tree to tree. The bacteria stops water flowing inside the tree, choking and killing it. The quality of olives on the diseased trees is not affected by the bacteria – but the quantity of olives certainly is as the trees lose their leaves and die. Significant scientific work is underway regarding the bacteria and identifying different olive varieties (like Leccino) that may be resilient. Puglia once produced 40% of Italy's olive oil, but its production is diminishing fast as the bacteria spreads. The bacteria may not like colder conditions. If cicadas are now also spreading the

bacteria, as is feared, the rate of spread may increase.

Fortunately, some 33 years ago (1991), and before the disease arrived in Solento, Antonio had planted a significant number of Leccino trees in part of the family's olive farm as an experimental variety. Harvesting of those mature Leccino (in their off year) was underway as we arrived at the farm. There are around 5,000 olive trees on the farm, other varieties being Carolea, Pisciolen and Favolosa. Beside the farm's swimming pool and farm trullo is a Carolea tree, with its multitude of elongated Carolea olives – of great interest to us as we had planted 200 Carolea trees on our grove in Martinborough in 2000. They did not grow well (winter and spring ground conditions too wet) or produce many olives; they are now all replaced or gone. Our Leccino trees, in comparison, produce well on a 2 yearly cycle. So immediately Tenuta Linazza was of great personal interest. Many new young Leccino trees have been recently planted (replacing the diseased dead trees), with fava beans forming their surrounding nutritional skirts for biologic olive farming. The young trees looked to be growing nicely, and I suspect more quickly than had our Leccino trees when we planted our grove in Martinborough, starting in 1997. Michele explained their mature trees were pruned on a 4 yearly basis.

Harvesting of the mature Leccino trees was by compressed air hand-held devices onto extensive nets spread on the ground under the trees, and the Leccino olives were mainly green, with green pulp. The olives were of similar size to ours. It appears the processors suffer the same difficulties as us in separating oil from ripe purple Leccino pulp, but I did not get into discussion on the use of enzymes and powder in oil processing. The autumn conditions were warm and dry – more pleasant than our usually cooler harvesting conditions in Martinborough. The nets were emptied into familiar yellow ventilated boxes.

We saw the farm's own mill, although it was not working while we were there. But we were fortunate to be taken to the nearby large, modern, commercial Perialisi mill to watch the Tenuta Linazza Leccino olives being processed: from loading, washing, crushing, malaxing, centrifugal spinning, with beautiful green oil emerging for immediate chemical testing, and final settling storage. The entire factory was cooled by air conditioning. The sense of ordered calm in the mill a decided contrast with the operation of our own, 75kgs, modern 'traditional' small, Aquarius Olive Press.

There were vast numbers of olive trees everywhere you looked on the fascinating day trips conducted by our hosts to the places they regarded as of interest around Solento and the wider Apulia region. We experienced helpfully structured winetasting at a vineyard where its best wines were tasted, with cards of particular pictures of the things you can taste in each of the particular wines, prepared to help you in identifying the particular tastes in the particular wines being tasted. We purchased pottery and paintings, and visited the Zinzulusa coastal cave. In the trip north to Alberobello (a UNESCO world heritage site) to see the Truli, we passed into land as yet unaffected by the disease, and saw the old olive trees in their full producing splendor, covered in leaves and in olives, as workers were presumably soon to be harvesting. This was our surprise 1 wet day – no one was picking olives. There were olive farms everywhere, and carefully tended olive trees on the sides of the roads, in the towns and villages, as well as in the countryside. An olive person's heaven.

Our olive farm-stay experience was personal, small and superb. Emilio, his wife Clara, and his brother Michele were the main hosts and tour guides, with Antonio, father of Emilio and Michele, assisting. Emilio and Clara live on the farm, which has its own restaurant and courtyard for functions and weddings. Emilio is the chef. He trained in Milan while at law school, and although he practiced law for a while in Milan, cheffing won out, and he returned home to the family olive

farm, establishing the restaurant. His passion is local 'pugliesi' food, including the eggless pasta, orecchiette, and of course uses the farm's extra virgin olive oil.

On day 7 we were dropped off at Brindisi train station by Emilio who, on route, described the intricacies of making of carbonara, and the best region of Italy in which to eat it.

From Apulia we trained to Sorento, visiting Pompeii, and then the Amalfi coast. Then 4 nights in Taormina, Sicily. Olive trees again were everywhere, but were not, it seemed from the trees we saw, affected by the disease prevalent in Sorento. At the top of the ancient Greek theatre in Taormina were beautifully tended trees, some with very small olives that look exactly like the Chemlali olives we planted in our grove – for us, very small olives, but high in oil content.

Our experience was booked through Taste of Salento – Authentic Culinary experience: Tourradar (www.tourradar.com/t/98588)

Details of the farm-stay tour can be viewed by anyone interested at www.tenutalinazza.it
The farm stay accommodation comprised 4 bedrooms (2 person) with en-suites.
Emilio provided our breakfasts and dinners. We purchased lunches at the daily tour venues, tasting the excellent olive oils accompanying each meal.

Robbie & Anne-Marie Cullum, Todds Road Olives

